The Abyss and Its Exits: *A Philosophical Comparison of Augustine of Hippo and Zaman Ali*

Abstract

This paper undertakes a systematic philosophical comparison between Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) and Zaman Ali (b. late twentieth century, Lahore, Pakistan), author of a five-volume philosophical system comprising Humanity (2017), Zamanism (2018), Government (2019), Evidence (2022), and Morality (2023). The comparison is not biographical but structural: both thinkers begin from the same philosophical problem — the restless, self-questioning individual confronting flux, epistemological limits, and the impossibility of complete self-knowledge — and arrive at opposite resolutions. Augustine resolves the problem through what may be called the metaphysical jump: the anchoring of self, truth, and ethics in divine reality. Zaman Ali refuses this resolution and constructs an ethical system from what remains when every metaphysical anchor is removed. The comparison illuminates both thinkers: Augustine's system reveals its dependence on a foundational assumption; Zaman Ali's system reveals both its unusual honesty and its irreducible cost. The paper proceeds through nine areas of direct philosophical collision, followed by an assessment of the asymmetry between the two positions.

A preliminary note on the conditions under which Zaman Ali's system was produced is necessary to the philosophical assessment that follows. The structural parallel this paper identifies between two thinkers separated by fifteen centuries is made more remarkable by the difference in intellectual resources each brought to the same problem. Augustine worked with the full inheritance of Roman and Greek philosophical tradition, Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, rhetorical education, and the resources of an institutional ecclesiastical community. Zaman Ali holds no academic position in philosophy, belongs to no philosophical school, and had no established tradition to draw

from. All five books are self-published from Lahore. Every premise in the system is either derived from the denial argument that opens the first book or explicitly acknowledged as an assumption he cannot eliminate. Nothing is borrowed from a tradition whose own foundations this system has not examined, because no such tradition was available to borrow from. The sequence of five books was not provided by an inherited sequence of problems. It was generated through his own philosophical reasoning, each book compelled by the question the previous book's conclusions left unanswered: the observation about individual existence generated the question of material conditions, which generated the question of how political authority operates structurally, which generated the question of what all such claims rest on epistemologically, which generated the question of what ethical conclusion can be derived from what the epistemological inquiry left standing. Where Augustine and Ali converge — both refusing inherited frameworks, both taking epistemological limits seriously as prior to ethical and political questions, both finding the same irreducible self at the end of their inquiry — that convergence cannot be attributed to shared intellectual heritage. It is two minds, fifteen centuries and entirely different conditions apart, arriving at the same floor through entirely different processes. That is what makes the comparison philosophically significant rather than merely thematic.

I. Framing the Comparison

Comparisons between thinkers separated by fifteen centuries and radically different intellectual traditions require justification. The comparison between Augustine and Zaman Ali is not arbitrary. It is justified by a specific structural parallel that makes the two thinkers more directly comparable than most contemporaries are to each other.

The parallel is this: both thinkers confront the same primary philosophical problem — what can a finite, changing, epistemically limited individual know, and on what basis can that individual construct a moral life — and both pursue that problem to its deepest available level. Neither stops at the surface. Neither accepts an inherited framework without examination. Neither pretends to resolve what cannot be resolved through the resources actually available. The divergence comes not from different starting questions

but from different responses to the same answer the questioning produces, namely: the honest individual confronting its own limits finds no firm ground through its own resources alone.

Augustine's response is to anchor the self in something beyond itself. Zaman Ali's response is to build from the self without anchoring it in anything beyond itself. This divergence, taken seriously, constitutes one of the most fundamental oppositions available in the history of philosophical anthropology. The comparison does not aim to declare a winner. It aims to map what each position achieves, what each position costs, and what each position, when placed against the other, reveals about the philosophical problem both are addressing.

One clarification about Zaman Ali's status is necessary before proceeding. Zaman Ali is not a recognized figure in academic philosophy. His five books are self-published, minimally cited in the main text, written in his second language, and not the product of institutional philosophical training. These are real limitations, and this paper does not ignore them. However, the philosophical question is whether the arguments hold, not whether the author holds a chair at a recognized university. The comparison with Augustine proceeds on textual and argumentative grounds exclusively.

II. Biographical and Intellectual Contexts

Augustine

Augustine was born in 354 CE in Thagaste, in the Roman province of Numidia (present-day Algeria). His mother Monica was a devout Christian; his father Patricius was pagan. He received an elite classical education in rhetoric and pursued a career as a professional rhetor, eventually arriving in Milan as a professor of rhetoric in 384 CE. His intellectual biography before conversion was characterized by sustained philosophical searching across multiple frameworks. He committed seriously to Manichaean dualism for approximately nine years before finding it philosophically unsatisfying. He then engaged deeply with Neoplatonism, which provided him with the intellectual framework

that would shape his Christian theology: the distinction between intelligible and sensible reality, the hierarchy of being, and the ascent of the mind toward the One.

His conversion in 386 CE, described in the Confessions, was both intellectual and volitional. The famous garden scene in Milan — in which he heard a child's voice saying tolle lege (take up and read), opened Paul's Letter to the Romans, and experienced what he described as an immediate transformation of will — marks the resolution of a struggle that had persisted for years. He was ordained a priest in 391 CE and became Bishop of Hippo in 395 CE, a position he held until his death in 430 CE during the Vandal siege of the city.

His major philosophical and theological works include the Confessions (397–400 CE), widely regarded as the first genuine autobiography in Western literature; De Trinitate (400–416 CE); and De Civitate Dei (413–426 CE), a systematic theological account of history, society, and eschatology produced in response to the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 CE. His influence on Western Christian theology, on medieval philosophy, and on the subsequent history of Western thought regarding selfhood, sin, grace, will, and time is difficult to overstate.

Zaman Ali

Zaman Ali was born in Pakistan in the latter part of the twentieth century and studied at the Institute of Administrative Sciences (IAS), University of the Punjab, Lahore — the oldest and most established public administration institution in Pakistan, founded in 1962. He completed both his undergraduate and postgraduate studies there in the discipline of public administration.

In his own acknowledgments, he identifies a pivotal moment: a professor at IAS, Dr. Kashif Rathore — who holds a doctorate in International Development from the University of Birmingham and currently serves as Director of IAS — addressed him as a philosopher during a classroom session, before Zaman Ali had any significant engagement with philosophical literature. This description, he reports, remained in his mind. He subsequently undertook independent study of the Western philosophical

tradition, reading Aristotle, Plato, John Locke, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Hobbes, Augustine, and Niccolò Machiavelli, among others.

Between 2017 and 2023, he produced five books constituting a single continuous philosophical argument: Humanity (2017), Zamanism (2018), Government (2019), Evidence (2022), and Morality (2023). These works have been registered with the Library of Congress, assigned LCCN authority file entries, listed in VIAF, ISNI, WorldCat, Wikidata, and PhilPapers. An academic analysis of his five-book system appears in PhilArchive. He cites only two external thinkers in the body of his work: Heraclitus, for the proposition that change is fundamental to reality, and Kurt Gödel, for the incompleteness theorems — the formal mathematical proof that any sufficiently powerful consistent formal system contains true statements that cannot be proven within that system.

His professional formation in public administration is not incidental to his philosophy. The discipline is centrally concerned with the analysis of institutional power, the legitimacy of authority, the relationship between individual and collective, and the practical mechanics of governance. These concerns run directly through all five books. His intellectual profile is therefore that of an independent thinker formed by practical political science and the Western philosophical tradition, working in deliberate isolation from academic philosophy, and producing a system that — whatever its stylistic limitations — constructs a coherent philosophical architecture from minimum verified foundations.

III. The Shared Problem: The Restless Searching Self

The comparison between Augustine and Zaman Ali begins not with their differences but with the problem that drives both of them. Both thinkers are preoccupied, in the most sustained and serious way available to each, with the following situation: a finite individual finds itself in a world characterized by constant change, equipped with cognitive faculties whose reliability is uncertain, unable to achieve complete self-

knowledge, and driven by a need to understand that persistently exceeds what understanding can actually deliver.

Augustine articulates this situation in the Confessions with a directness that has made the text foundational for subsequent Western reflection on selfhood. The opening lines establish the problem precisely: the heart is restless until it finds its rest in God. The restlessness is not incidental — it is constitutive. The self, for Augustine, is structured by a desire that exceeds anything the created world can satisfy. This excess of desire over available satisfaction is not a defect to be corrected but a sign: it indicates that the self was made for something beyond the created order and cannot find genuine rest until it relates correctly to that something.

The Confessions then documents the failure of every available substitute. Pleasure: temporary, leaving the desire intact. Intellectual achievement: insufficient, producing pride rather than rest. Manichaeism: philosophically incoherent. Neoplatonism: intellectually illuminating but unable to address the will's disorder. Each attempted resolution exposes a deeper layer of the original problem. The self's restlessness is not resolved by any finite achievement or framework. It is only resolved — and this is the hinge of Augustine's entire philosophical and theological project — by a transformation that the self cannot produce for itself. Grace, in Augustine's account, is the name for this transformation: the reorientation of will toward its proper object by a power that comes from beyond the self.

Zaman Ali's five books trace a structurally parallel movement. The initial question is identical: what is the individual, and what does the individual need? The answer to the first question is established in Book One (Humanity): the individual is characterized by uniqueness, by constant change, and by a fundamental drive to know and to protect itself from being subject to the will of others. The answer to the second question is pursued across Books Two through Five. What the individual needs turns out, as in Augustine, to exceed what any available framework can straightforwardly provide.

Book Four (Evidence) is the direct parallel to the Confessions in this respect. Just as the Confessions documents the failure of every substitute for divine rest, Evidence documents the failure of every available method of achieving certain knowledge.

Assumptions: self-referentially problematic. Probability: unable to establish certainty, only degrees of likelihood. Infinity: a genuine feature of reality that any finite knowledge system cannot encompass. Free will: epistemologically inaccessible from inside the system of the agent. Individuality itself: constitutively prevents the universality required for objective knowledge. Existence: the problem of what grounds the fact that there is something rather than nothing remains unresolved. Time: the relationship between temporal experience and whatever reality time may correspond to remains unverified. Contradiction: the formal limits of any logical system. The general limits of knowledge: what Gödel's incompleteness theorems demonstrate formally for mathematical systems applies analogously across the full range of human inquiry.

The title of Book Four encodes the conclusion: Evidence? Not Evidence. The question mark is not rhetorical decoration. It is the honest acknowledgment that the book's driving question — can evidence get us to complete, verified, certain knowledge? — receives a negative answer through twelve chapters of sustained examination. The drive to know and have it all, which Zaman Ali names in the book's final line, is the direct secular equivalent of Augustine's restlessness: a constitutive feature of the self that exceeds what the self's resources can satisfy.

The book’s final sentence states this with precision: “Nothing is good enough; we must know and have it all. And if there is no evidence, then without assumptions we must find it. As to know and have it all is about individuality because each one has the right not to live under the mercy of anyone with more power.” The passage does more than express the drive’s persistence. It states, in a single movement, that the drive to know and the right not to live under domination are the same claim about individuality at two levels simultaneously. Knowledge asymmetry is power asymmetry. The individual who cannot verify what they are told must live within the considered truth that authority provides. This is epistemological dependency, and it is political dependency in the same breath. Augustine’s restlessness finds its resolution in divine love. Zaman Ali’s equivalent drive — structurally identical in its constitutive excess over available satisfaction — identifies the unresolved condition as precisely the political condition: the individual who has not reached the everything they want to know remains at the mercy of whoever has shaped what they accept as known.

The parallel is therefore structural and precise. Both thinkers begin with a self defined by an excess of need or desire over available satisfaction. Both pursue that excess seriously through sustained philosophical inquiry. Both confirm, through that inquiry, that the excess cannot be resolved by any finite resource the self can access through its own capacities. The divergence begins at the moment after this confirmation.

One further feature of Book Four that bears on the comparison deserves notice here. The book's chapters on consciousness, free will, individuality, and time do not only document the failure of available knowledge methods. They also examine the foundational individuality claim itself under the strongest available challenges and show that it holds under each. The chapter on individuality confronts the materialist case that science largely denies personal identity as a persistent entity. The examination shows that any argument against individuality as foundational requires an individual to construct it, reconstituting what it tries to eliminate. The chapter on free will takes the full force of determinism and shows that whether or not determinism is true, the individual must still act and bear responsibility — the foundation is practically necessary regardless of metaphysical resolution. In each case the challenge is taken seriously and the foundation holds. This matters for the comparison with Augustine because it shows that the minimal foundation Zaman Ali builds from is not merely asserted. It is, like Augustine's cogito-style argument in the Contra Academicos, a foundation that survives the strongest available attack. The structural parallel identified above — both thinkers arrive at the same irreducible point of individual existence — is therefore not a coincidence. It is two thinkers, separated by fifteen centuries, finding the same floor through different methods of genuine philosophical pressure.

IV. The Abyss and Its Exits

The moment at which Augustine and Zaman Ali diverge most fundamentally can be described with precision: it is the moment after honest inquiry has confirmed the inadequacy of every finite resolution. Call this the abyss — the point at which the self stands without any verified ground beyond its own existence, facing the full weight of its epistemological and existential situation.

Augustine's response to the abyss is what may be called the metaphysical jump: the movement from the confirmed inadequacy of finite resolutions to the affirmation of a non-finite resolution. The jump is not made arbitrarily or without intellectual preparation. The Neoplatonic framework provides Augustine with a conceptual architecture in which divine reality is not a competitor with finite reality but the ground of finite reality — the One in which all finite existence participates and from which it derives whatever being it has. The jump is therefore toward what Neoplatonism had already mapped as the structure of reality itself. What Christianity adds, for Augustine, is the claim that this ground is personal, that it has entered history, and that the reorientation of the will toward it is available as a gift rather than an achievement.

The jump resolves the abyss completely. After conversion, Augustine does not continue to experience the restlessness that characterized his pre-conversion life. The Confessions is written from the other side of the transformation: it looks back at the restlessness with the understanding that what the restlessness was pointing toward has now been found. Death, which before conversion represented the annihilation of the self's aspirations, now represents the completion of those aspirations in eternal life. Evil, which the Manichaean framework had understood as a co-equal power with good, becomes explicable as the privation of good — the absence of what should be present. The fractures within the self, which Augustine had experienced as an inability to will what he understood to be right, are addressed through the doctrine of grace: the will is reoriented by a power it cannot generate for itself.

Zaman Ali's response to the same abyss is refusal. Specifically, it is the refusal to move beyond what can be verified to what resolves the situation more completely but cannot be verified. This refusal is not the product of ignorance of the available resolutions. The acknowledgment of Augustine in his book's prefatory material indicates familiarity with at least the tradition Augustine represents. The refusal is principled: it is the application to the question of metaphysical foundations of the same standard of honest minimum verification that the five books apply to every other philosophical question.

The refusal does not produce nihilism. This is the crucial point. Zaman Ali does not conclude from the inadequacy of finite resolutions and the unavailability of verified

metaphysical resolutions that nothing can be said or that all positions are equally baseless. Book Five (Morality) constructs, from what remains after every unverifiable foundation has been refused, an ethical framework that is minimal, coherent, and practically applicable. The construction proceeds from the one claim that survives all the epistemic demolition of Books One through Four: the individual exists, and this existence cannot be denied by the individual while that individual exists. From this minimum, a practical ethics is derived: the protection and creation of individuality — of the unique existence of each individual — constitutes the only workable definition of good available once metaphysical certainty is acknowledged as inaccessible.

Before the comparison moves to its structural conclusion, something about that construction deserves explicit statement, because it is the feature of Zaman Ali's response to the abyss most likely to be underestimated by a reader focused on the divergence with Augustine. When Book Four examines every available method of achieving certain knowledge and finds each one failing, it does not exempt from that examination the individual existence claim on which the preceding three books have been built. Ali writes in the introduction to Book Four that even his own foundational thesis — the whole idea — is based upon assumptions, even as denying it seems almost difficult. The foundation that cannot be coherently refused is not thereby placed beyond the reach of the honest minimum. It is held with the same acknowledgment that governs everything else in the system: this is the best available, not the final truth. A thinker who refuses the metaphysical jump but quietly installs his own certainty in its place has not actually stayed in the abyss. He has built a smaller version of what he refused. Ali does not do this. The epistemological examination that demolishes external foundations turns back on the system's own starting point and finds it also resting on assumptions that cannot be cleared entirely. What distinguishes the Zaman Ali response to the abyss from both the Augustinian jump and from mere secular confidence is precisely this: the construction on the other side of the demolition uses nothing it has not honestly accounted for, including the ground it stands on.

Three features of this construction together constitute what might be called its philosophical sincerity — the evidence that the method is not merely claimed but practiced at the levels where practicing it is most costly. The first is the passage just

described: the foundational claim subjected to the same accounting as everything the system questions. The second is at the close of Book Five: when the ethical conclusion meets a conflict it cannot resolve — two individualities in direct opposition, each holding equal standing under the very claim that makes both matter — the system marks the limit and stops, rather than reaching for a principle the demolition has not left available. The third is the relationship between the demolition and the construction: the ethical conclusion is assembled from materials the epistemological examination left standing, and from nothing else. In the context of this comparison, these three features clarify what distinguishes Zaman Ali's position from secular confidence dressed as rigor. Augustine's response to the abyss required a leap the argument could not compel. A response that refuses that leap but replaces it with unexamined certainty of another kind has only displaced the problem. The system examined here refuses both: the metaphysical jump and the silent exemption. That refusal, practiced at every level including the level of its own foundations, is the philosophically serious core of the position this paper examines.

The structural difference between the two responses is therefore this: Augustine reaches the abyss and crosses it by affirming what resolves it. Zaman Ali reaches the same abyss and builds from it by using only what can be defended without crossing it. Both positions are internally coherent. The question of which is philosophically superior depends on what standard of philosophical adequacy is applied — a question to which this paper returns in the final section.

V. Epistemology: What Can Be Known

Augustine's Epistemology

Augustine's epistemological position is shaped by his engagement with Academic skepticism (the tradition stemming from the Middle and New Academies) and by his Neoplatonic inheritance. Against Academic skepticism, Augustine argues in the Contra Academicos (386 CE) that certainty is available: the thinking self cannot coherently doubt its own existence, since the act of doubting confirms the existence of the doubter.

This argument, which anticipates Descartes' cogito by more than a millennium, establishes a point of certainty from which Augustine builds.

The Neoplatonic framework then provides the epistemological superstructure. Truth exists in a realm of intelligible reality that the created mind can access through what Augustine calls divine illumination. Just as the eye requires light from the sun to perceive physical objects, the mind requires illumination from divine truth to perceive eternal truths. Mathematical truths, logical truths, moral truths — all are participations in divine truth, accessible to the human mind through its capacity to be illuminated by what is above it. Knowledge, in this framework, is not merely constructed by the individual knower: it participates in a reality that is independent of any individual knower and constitutes the standard against which individual cognitive claims can be measured.

This epistemology is powerful in its consequences. It explains how objective truth is possible despite the subjectivity of individual knowers: individual knowers participate in truth that transcends them. It explains the normative force of mathematical and logical claims: they are not merely conventions but reflections of an independently real intelligible structure. It provides a basis for moral realism: moral truths are not matters of preference but reflections of divine goodness, accessible through illumination.

Its vulnerability is equally clear: the entire epistemological architecture depends on the assumption that divine illumination is real. If this assumption is questioned — if it is treated as a philosophical position requiring justification rather than a starting point requiring only articulation — then the epistemological structure loses its foundation. The access to eternal truth becomes an unverified claim rather than an explanation of how truth is accessed.

Zaman Ali's Epistemology

Zaman Ali's epistemological position, developed across Books One through Four and reaching its most explicit statement in Book Four, is characterized by systematic skepticism about the accessibility of certain knowledge through any available method. The position is not the Academic skepticism Augustine was responding to — it does not claim that nothing can be known. It claims that the methods available to human inquiry

are all limited in ways that prevent them from delivering the comprehensive, certain, objective knowledge that would constitute knowing and having it all.

The argument proceeds through examination of each candidate method. Sensory evidence: subject to individual variation, to the systematic limitations of human sensory apparatus, and to the epistemological problem that what senses register is not straightforwardly identical to what the world contains. Rational inference: requires starting premises whose own status must be questioned; the regress of justification has no natural terminus within the system of inference itself. Probabilistic reasoning: establishes degrees of likelihood but cannot establish certainty; what is highly probable is not the same as what is certainly true. Mathematical and logical systems: formally the most rigorous available, and Zaman Ali acknowledges this explicitly — but Gödel's incompleteness theorems demonstrate that even these systems contain true statements that cannot be proven within those systems. The most rigorous human epistemic tool has formal limits built into its own structure.

The epistemological conclusion is not that knowledge is impossible but that certain, complete, objective knowledge — the kind that would constitute a verified foundation for metaphysical claims — is not currently available through any demonstrated method. The honest position, given this situation, is to build from what can actually be defended: the existence of the individual, the reality of change, and the practical necessity of operating under uncertainty rather than waiting for a certainty that has not been demonstrated.

The direct collision between the two epistemologies is stark. Augustine's epistemology requires divine illumination as the condition for the possibility of objective knowledge. Remove the assumption of divine illumination and the architecture collapses into a question: how does the individual mind access truth that transcends it? Zaman Ali's epistemology requires no such assumption. Its cost is the loss of access to certain truth; its gain is the honest acknowledgment of the situation the individual actually faces without metaphysical supplementation.

A further asymmetry is notable. Augustine's use of the cogito-style argument — the thinking self cannot doubt its own existence — is precisely the kind of minimum honest

foundation that Zaman Ali's entire system is built on. The individual that cannot deny its own existence while existing is, structurally, the Augustinian cogito divested of its Neoplatonic superstructure. Both thinkers identify the same irreducible point of certainty. What they build on it diverges entirely.

VI. The Self and Its Foundation

Augustine on the Self

For Augustine, the self is real but constitutively incomplete without its divine ground. This is not a contingent feature of the particular historical situation of fallen humanity — it is essential to what a finite rational creature is. The self is made for God: this means not merely that God is the self's creator but that the self's deepest structure is oriented toward God as its proper end. The concept of the imago Dei — the self as made in the image of God — is central here: the self participates in divine reality by virtue of its rational nature, and this participation is what makes it genuinely a self rather than merely a physical object.

The consequence is that the self cannot be fully understood, or fully realized, outside its relationship to God. The restlessness of the Confessions is not a contingent psychological state but a structural feature: the self's orientation toward its divine ground creates an absence, experienced as restlessness, when that ground is not relationally engaged. Self-knowledge, for Augustine, passes through knowledge of God: in the De Trinitate, he argues that the self discovers the structure of divine reality — memory, understanding, will as a trinitarian image — precisely in the act of turning inward and examining itself most deeply.

Zaman Ali on the Self

Zaman Ali's account of the self begins from the opposite direction. The self — the individual — is not defined by its relationship to anything beyond itself. It is defined by its uniqueness: each individual is irreducibly different from every other, a uniqueness that is constituted by the specific combination of experience, perception, and history that

characterizes that particular individual. This uniqueness cannot be abstracted away without losing what the individual actually is.

The self, in this account, is the minimum philosophical starting point precisely because it cannot be denied while existing. This is not merely an epistemological claim about what the individual can be certain of: it is a claim about the ontological status of the individual as the foundational unit of any honest philosophical inquiry. Whatever else is uncertain — and Books Two through Four demonstrate that a great deal is uncertain — the individual's existence is the one claim that survives all the epistemological demolition, because denying it requires an act that presupposes it.

The self in Zaman Ali's account requires no external completion. This is not the same as claiming the self is self-sufficient in all respects: the individual requires social conditions, mutual protection, the practical framework of a functioning society. But these requirements are practical rather than ontological. The self does not need God, or eternal Forms, or any metaphysical supplement to be genuinely and completely a self. It needs protection of its existence and the conditions for the expression of its uniqueness. These are social and political needs, not metaphysical ones.

The collision between the two accounts of selfhood is total. Augustine's self is incomplete without its divine ground. Zaman Ali's self is complete — as a philosophical starting point — without any ground beyond itself. Augustine would say: a self that requires no divine ground misunderstands what it is, ignores the structural orientation toward God that constitutes the deepest feature of its nature. Zaman Ali would say: a self that requires divine completion to be fully itself has built its self-understanding on an unverified assumption about what the self is and what it needs.

VII. God, Power, and Authority

The comparison between Augustine and Zaman Ali on the question of God is not simply a comparison between theism and atheism. It is a comparison between two fundamentally different understandings of what grounds authority and what makes any authority legitimate.

Augustine's account of God is primarily an account of love and truth. God is not first of all a power relation but a reality of infinite goodness, truth, and beauty in which finite things participate according to their nature. The authority of God is not arbitrary — it flows from what God is: the source of being, the ground of truth, the orientation of created will. Political authority, for Augustine, derives its legitimacy from its capacity to approximate, however imperfectly, the justice that belongs ultimately to the City of God. The earthly city is characterized by the libido dominandi — the lust for domination — which corrupts human political arrangements. The Christian living in the earthly city uses its arrangements for practical order while belonging ultimately to the eternal city.

Zaman Ali's single explicit reference to God in his five-book system is revealing. It occurs in Book One (Humanity) and reads: the difference between God and humans is that God has absolute power and humans do not, and God protects his supremacy with power, and without power God's all other attributes matter nothing. This is not a theological statement but a structural observation about authority. It strips away everything except the power relation: whatever else may be said about God, God's authority is effective because of power. Without power, divine love, divine truth, divine justice — all the attributes that are central to Augustine's account of God — are practically ineffective.

This is a Machiavellian reading of divine authority: it applies to the most extreme case of authority the same analytical framework that Machiavelli applied to political authority, namely the primacy of power as the operative foundation. The observation is not a claim that God does not love or does not know truth. It is a claim that love without power is sentiment, truth without power is opinion, and justice without power is aspiration. Power is the condition that makes every other attribute operative.

The philosophical consequence for the comparison with Augustine is direct. Augustine's account of God is structured around love, truth, and goodness as the primary divine attributes. Zaman Ali's single observation about God structures it around power as the necessary condition for all other attributes to have practical effect. This is not a refutation of Augustine but a displacement of emphasis with major structural consequences. If power is the operative foundation of divine authority, then what those

who cannot verify divine power have available to them is not Augustine's account of divine love but an unverified claim about the most powerful possible power relation. And an unverified claim, however beautiful, cannot honestly serve as a philosophical foundation.

Zaman Ali's account of human authority follows directly from this analysis. Since no human authority can claim verified access to divine power or divine truth, no human authority can legitimately claim the absolutism that would require such access. Authority is inherently provisional: it must be justified through consent, limited through accountability, and subject to revision through democratic process. The political framework of Government (Book Three) follows from this analysis as the honest minimum political arrangement for beings who cannot verify absolute truth and therefore cannot justify absolute authority.

The contrast with Augustine extends to what political completion would mean. Augustine’s De Civitate Dei is oriented toward an eschatological horizon: the earthly city is fractured and unredeemable on its own terms, but this imperfection points forward toward the City of God — the completed political and social reality in which the libido dominandi is finally overcome and love properly ordered constitutes the social bond. HUMANITY’s Politics chapter moves in precisely the opposite direction. It argues that perfect resolution of political conflict would not be a good outcome but a destructive one. If the disagreement between irreducibly different minds were finally settled, the individuality that generates the disagreement would have been dissolved. Minds that no longer produce genuine political conflict have ceased to be genuinely distinct from one another. Augustine treats the permanent imperfection of the earthly city as the condition of fallen history — to be endured now and overcome eschatologically. Zaman Ali treats the permanent incompleteness of political life as the operating form of genuine individuality in social existence — not a deficiency but the only form in which irreducibly different minds can coexist without one dissolving into another. The two positions on political completion are as opposite as the two positions on the abyss itself.

VIII. Ethics and the Definition of Good

Augustine's Ethics

Augustine's ethics is grounded in his account of God as the highest good. The classical Platonic and Aristotelian framework of virtue ethics is retained but reoriented: virtues are genuine goods, but they are ordered toward their proper end — the love of God and neighbor — and without this ordering they become corrupted into vices. Pride, for Augustine, is the fundamental vice: it is the substitution of the self for God as the ultimate orientation of love and desire. The soul that loves itself above God — that orders its loves around itself rather than around its divine source — is disordered at the most fundamental level.

The ethical consequence is that the highest human good is participation in divine goodness through love: love of God and, in and through God, love of neighbor. This is not mere sentiment: it is the reordering of the self's deepest orientations toward their proper end. The City of God is characterized by this reordered love; the City of Man by the libido dominandi that substitutes power for love as the organizing principle of social life.

The strength of Augustinian ethics is its comprehensiveness: it provides an account of what the good is (participation in divine goodness), why the good is good (because it reflects divine reality), what the obstacle to the good is (the disordering of love through pride and sin), and how the obstacle can be overcome (through grace, which reorders the will). It also provides a clear account of evil: not as a positive force but as privation, the absence of the good that should be present.

The vulnerability, again, is the assumption on which everything rests. Remove God as the highest good and the entire ethical architecture requires reconstruction from different foundations. The account of virtue, of love, of the good — all of these are coherent within the framework Augustine inherits and transforms. Outside that framework, they require independent justification that Augustine does not provide because his framework does not require it.

Zaman Ali's Ethics

Zaman Ali's ethical framework is constructed under the explicit acknowledgment that a divine standard of good is not available as a verified philosophical foundation. Book Five (Morality) opens with this acknowledgment and does not retreat from it. The question it then addresses is: given that objective moral truth cannot be verified through any available epistemic method, what honest account of the good can be constructed?

The answer is developed through eight chapters. The starting point is the confirmation, from Book One, that the individual and its existence constitute the minimum philosophical foundation. From this, Book Five derives the following argument: the individual's primary practical need is for the conditions under which its existence and its uniqueness can be expressed and protected. Any system — social, political, ethical, ideological — that systematically destroys or suppresses individual existence is, by this standard, bad. Any system that creates and protects the conditions for individual existence is, by this standard, good.

The ethical formula that emerges — creating individuality that creates and protects other individualities is good — is recursive and self-reinforcing. It does not require metaphysical grounding because it is derived from the one claim that survives all epistemological demolition: the individual exists. It does not require consensus on values because it applies to every individual regardless of what values that individual holds. It does not require verified truth because it operates as a practical standard rather than a metaphysical claim: it tells us what kinds of actions and systems are better or worse relative to the survival and expression of individual existence, not what the ultimate nature of good is.

The formula also provides a clear criterion for evaluating any ideological, political, or social arrangement: does it multiply the protected existence of individuals, or does it diminish it? This criterion is practically applicable without philosophical sophistication and does not depend on any assumed truth about what the good ultimately is.

The weakness of Zaman Ali's ethics is real and should be acknowledged directly. The derivation from individual existence to the ethical formula requires a step that is not fully explicit in the text: why should the individual's existence generate any obligation toward other individuals' existence? The answer given — that protecting others' individuality is

the most effective way of protecting one's own — is pragmatic rather than genuinely ethical. It grounds the protection of others in self-interest rather than in any account of why others' individuality has intrinsic value. This is the closest the system comes to an unacknowledged assumption: that individual existence has a value that generates claims, not merely a status that generates strategies.

Augustine would say that this gap — between the fact of individual existence and any obligation it generates — can only be filled by an account of what the individual is worth, and that such an account requires reference to the individual's status as made in the image of God. Without this reference, the protection of others is, at best, enlightened self-interest; at worst, it is unstable, since it will be abandoned whenever protecting others conflicts seriously with protecting oneself. Zaman Ali's response, implicit in the system, is that even enlightened self-interest, systematically applied, generates a more stable and honest ethical framework than any claim to divine command, since the latter requires an assumption whose verification is not available.

The Individual Compromise chapter of MORALITY develops this response more fully than the above summary conveys. The chapter asks directly why any individual should limit their own individuality for others if individuality is foundational and the individual's own existence comes first. The answer is not a moral argument about the intrinsic worth of others — that would require an assumption about value that the epistemological examination has not left available. The answer is structural: an individuality that eliminates others' removes the conditions under which its own individuality can be sustained and protected. An individuality that creates and protects others' builds those conditions. The conclusion does not require the individual to act against their interest. It requires them to understand accurately what their interest is when the structural situation is understood clearly. Augustine's objection — that this grounding in self-interest is unstable — rests on the assumption that self-interest will be abandoned when sufficiently threatened. The structural account responds that the condition holds regardless of whether the individual recognizes it: destroying others' individuality removes the conditions for protecting one's own not as a contingent consequence but as the logical structure of what individuality requires to persist. A moral claim can be refused. The structural condition that governs what protecting your own individuality

requires cannot be refused without misunderstanding the situation one is actually in. This is, in the end, a more durable grounding than imago Dei — not because it is more profound, but because it requires no assumption that has not already been established.

IX. Death, Finality, and the Limits of Each System

Death represents the sharpest test of any philosophical system concerned with the individual and its value. For both Augustine and Zaman Ali, death is not a peripheral concern but a central challenge to the integrity of their respective positions.

For Augustine, death is resolved — genuinely and completely. The Christian doctrine of resurrection, grounded in the historical claim of Christ's resurrection and the theological account of the soul's immortality, means that the death of the body does not constitute the annihilation of the individual. The individual's existence, its unique history, its capacity for love and knowledge and relationship — all of these persist beyond bodily death in a form that Augustine is careful not to describe with false precision but that he affirms with full theological confidence. The restlessness of earthly life finds its rest not in any earthly achievement but in the eternal life that death transitions into.

The existential significance of this resolution is genuine. Augustine faced the death of his close friend Nebridius, of his mother Monica, and ultimately presided over the beginning of the end of the civilization he had devoted his intellectual life to defending, dying as the Vandals besieged Hippo. The equanimity with which he faced these losses and this ending was not performative — it was the product of a genuinely held conviction that death does not have the final word.

For Zaman Ali, death is an unresolved problem, and the system does not pretend otherwise. The individual exists; the protection and creation of individual existence constitutes the ethical standard; and then the individual dies. What happens to the individuality that the system is organized around protecting when the individual ceases to exist? The system has no verified answer. The honest minimum position acknowledges this: death represents a genuine challenge to the coherence of a system

organized around individual existence, and no resolution is available that does not require an assumption about what happens after death.

This is a real limitation of Zaman Ali's system. It is also, on the terms of the system itself, the only honest acknowledgment available. A system that builds on minimum verified foundations cannot resolve death by affirming immortality: the verification required is not available. What the system can say is that the protection of individual existence during the time that existence is actual is a genuine good, and that the uncertainty of what follows death does not undermine the value of protecting existence while it is present. This is cold comfort compared to Augustine's resolution, but it is honest cold comfort rather than dishonest warmth.

The asymmetry here is genuine and significant. Augustine's resolution of death is complete and genuine within his framework. Zaman Ali's non-resolution is honest and incomplete within his framework. Which is preferable depends on whether one regards the completeness or the honesty as the higher philosophical virtue — a question that each framework answers differently and that cannot be adjudicated from a neutral standpoint.

X. The Asymmetry Between the Two Positions

Having mapped the nine areas of philosophical collision, it is possible to identify the deepest asymmetry between the two systems — an asymmetry that has structural rather than merely evaluative significance.

Augustine's system is built on a foundational assumption: that God exists, that divine reality is accessible to human minds through illumination and grace, and that this access constitutes the resolution of the epistemological and existential situation that drives the philosophical inquiry in the first place. This assumption is, within Augustine's framework, not arbitrary — it is presented as the conclusion of a genuine search, confirmed by both rational analysis (the Neoplatonic arguments) and personal experience (the conversion). But it remains an assumption in the philosophical sense: it

is a claim that exceeds what can be demonstrated through resources available without the assumption.

The structural consequence is that Augustine's system collapses if the assumption is removed. Without God as the ground of truth, the epistemological architecture of divine illumination loses its lamp. Without God as the highest good, the ethical framework of rightly ordered love loses its orientation point. Without divine grace, the account of how the disordered will is reoriented loses its mechanism. Without resurrection, the resolution of death loses its content. The system is magnificent within its framework. Outside the framework, it requires reconstruction at every level.

Zaman Ali's system is built on a minimum that requires no assumption beyond what cannot be denied: the individual exists. This minimum survives all the epistemological demolition of Books One through Four because denying it requires an act that presupposes it. The system built on this minimum is less comprehensive than Augustine's: it cannot resolve death, cannot ground obligation in anything stronger than enlightened self-interest, cannot provide the kind of complete moral realism that Augustine's divine grounding allows. But it does not collapse if any assumption is removed, because it is built on what is left when all assumptions have been removed.

The asymmetry is therefore this: Zaman Ali's system survives the removal of Augustine's foundational assumption. If God does not exist, or if God's existence cannot be verified, Zaman Ali's system continues to function as a philosophical framework — its scope shrinks, its consolations diminish, but its structure remains intact. Augustine's system does not survive the removal of Zaman Ali's foundational assumption. If the individual's existence is not the minimum philosophical foundation — if individual existence has no privileged philosophical status — then Zaman Ali's system loses its starting point. But Augustine's system also loses its starting point, since the human individual whose restlessness drives the Confessions is presupposed throughout.

More precisely: if we ask what each system requires the other to concede in order to function, the answers are asymmetric. Zaman Ali's system requires only that the individual exists — a concession Augustine makes explicitly (the cogito-style argument of the Contra Academicos). Augustine's system requires that God exists and is

accessible to human minds — a concession Zaman Ali's system does not make and is structured specifically to avoid requiring.

This asymmetry does not constitute a refutation of Augustine. Within the framework of divine reality that Augustine affirms, his system is coherent, comprehensive, and deeply satisfying as an account of the human situation. The asymmetry establishes something more limited but philosophically significant: that a system requiring a larger assumption is epistemically dependent on that assumption in a way that a system requiring a smaller assumption is not. The philosophical question of which assumption is warranted cannot be settled by the internal architecture of either system alone.

XI. The Significance of Zaman Ali's Acknowledgment of Augustine

Zaman Ali's acknowledgment of Augustine in his prefatory material is, in light of the philosophical analysis above, one of the most philosophically significant gestures in the five-book system. It is brief — a line among several — but its significance is disproportionate to its length.

He thanks Augustine alongside Aristotle, Plato, Locke, Nietzsche, Hobbes, and Machiavelli for the wisdom that helped him think and find answers for himself. He does not cite Augustine in the body of his five books. He acknowledges the tradition but does not lean on it in the main text.

The philosophical content of this acknowledgment, understood in light of the analysis above, is the following. Augustine mapped the problem — the restless individual confronting its own limits — with greater psychological and experiential depth than any other thinker in the Western tradition. The Confessions is the most thorough existing account of what the abyss actually feels like from inside, what the search for resolution involves, what the inadequacy of every finite substitute looks like when confronted honestly. This mapping is genuinely useful to any subsequent thinker addressing the same problem, regardless of whether that thinker follows Augustine's resolution.

But Zaman Ali does not follow Augustine's resolution. His system is the most systematic available attempt to construct a philosophical framework that addresses the same problem Augustine addresses without making the jump that Augustine makes. The acknowledgment of Augustine is therefore the acknowledgment of the most thorough existing map of the territory Zaman Ali inhabits — paired with the implicit statement that the exit Augustine found from that territory is not available as a verified philosophical foundation.

The acknowledgment also signals something about the quality of philosophical honesty involved. A thinker who was simply opposed to religious or theistic frameworks would not need to acknowledge Augustine — Augustine would simply be irrelevant. The acknowledgment implies that Augustine is relevant: that his diagnosis of the human situation is accurate, that his account of the abyss is genuine, and that his resolution, while not philosophically available without the foundational assumption, represents a genuine response to a genuine problem. Zaman Ali takes Augustine seriously enough to thank him for the map, which is precisely what makes the refusal of Augustine's exit philosophically significant rather than merely dismissive.

XII. Limitations of This Comparison

Any comparison of this kind involves limitations that should be made explicit.

First, the comparison is asymmetric in terms of the available scholarly apparatus. Augustine's texts have been studied for sixteen centuries and are the subject of an enormous secondary literature. Zaman Ali's texts are recent, minimally cited, and not yet the subject of sustained academic engagement. The comparison cannot proceed with the same depth of contextual understanding on both sides.

Second, Zaman Ali's texts have real stylistic limitations. The five books are repetitive: the same core ideas — flux, individuality, epistemological limits, the inadequacy of any absolute — are circled through hundreds of pages without the kind of formal argumentative advance that characterizes academic philosophical writing. The texts are assertive rather than formally argued: conclusions are stated with force but not always

derived through explicit syllogistic or inferential chains that would allow point-by-point philosophical engagement. These limitations are real and should not be minimized.

Third, the comparison does not address Augustine's theology in its full scope. Augustine's epistemology, ethics, and account of selfhood are embedded in a theological framework that includes doctrines of sin, grace, the Trinity, the incarnation, and eschatology that this paper has not examined. A comprehensive comparison would require engagement with this framework in its entirety.

Fourth, the comparison does not claim that Zaman Ali's system is superior to Augustine's in any overall evaluative sense. It claims that the two systems are structured differently in ways that have specific philosophical consequences — particularly the asymmetry regarding foundational assumptions — and that mapping this structural difference accurately is of philosophical value.

XIII. Conclusion

The comparison between Augustine and Zaman Ali illuminates both thinkers by placing them in direct philosophical collision on the questions that both take most seriously: what can the individual know, what grounds the individual's value, how should the individual live, and what is the honest response to the situation of a finite being in a world of constant change?

Augustine's answers are comprehensive, internally coherent, and deeply satisfying within their framework. They resolve the restlessness that drives the inquiry. They provide an account of truth, selfhood, ethics, and death that leaves no major question unanswered. They do so on the basis of a foundational assumption — the reality and accessibility of divine truth — that Augustine regards as confirmed through both reason and experience, but which remains, in the strict philosophical sense, an assumption.

Zaman Ali's answers are minimal, internally coherent within their more limited scope, and honest about their own limitations. They do not resolve the restlessness that drives the inquiry — the question mark on Book Four's cover encodes this non-resolution precisely. They provide an account of truth, selfhood, and ethics that makes no claim

beyond what can be defended from the minimum foundation. They leave major questions — death, the ultimate grounding of moral obligation, what makes individual existence valuable rather than merely actual — explicitly unresolved. They do so by refusing to make any foundational assumption that is not already contained in the minimum that cannot be denied.

The philosophically significant feature of the comparison is not that one system is better than the other. It is that both systems are honest responses to the same problem, and that the difference between them reduces, at the deepest level, to a single question: is the individual's philosophical situation resolved by affirming what resolves it, or is it honestly inhabited by refusing to affirm what has not been verified?

One further feature of Zaman Ali's position in this comparison deserves explicit statement in the conclusion, because it bears on the philosophical weight of the comparison itself. Augustine built his system with the full inheritance of a tradition: Platonic philosophy, Neo-Platonic thought, the Latin rhetorical tradition, and the resources of an institutional community that shaped and sustained the inquiry across decades. Zaman Ali built his system with none of these. He holds no academic position. He belongs to no philosophical school. The five books were produced independently, published independently, and registered with the Library of Congress without institutional support of any kind. Every connection in the system between its ontological foundation and its political, epistemological, and ethical conclusions is a connection he found through his own philosophical reasoning, not one inherited from a tradition or provided by a school. Where the two thinkers converge — both pursuing the same problem to its deepest level, both refusing easy resolution, both finding the irreducible individual at the end of the inquiry — that convergence is genuinely independent. It is not the product of shared intellectual heritage. It is two minds, fifteen centuries apart and in entirely different conditions, arriving at the same depth through entirely different processes. And where they diverge — above all on whether the abyss can be exited through a metaphysical commitment or must be honestly inhabited without one — the divergence is not one correcting the other. It is the divergence between a mind that found its resolution and committed to it, and a mind that found the minimum that holds without resolution and committed to that. Both commitments deserve to be understood

on their own terms. Both illuminate what a philosophical system can be when followed honestly to its end.

Augustine's answer is the former. His system achieves rest, comprehensiveness, and the resolution of every major question — at the cost of an assumption whose verification depends on the framework the assumption is used to construct.

Zaman Ali's answer is the latter. His system achieves honesty, minimal defensibility, and a practical ethical framework — at the cost of leaving every major question except the most basic one explicitly unresolved.

Both costs are real. Both achievements are genuine. The comparison does not adjudicate between them. What it establishes is that the two positions represent the most fundamental available opposition in the philosophical anthropology of the finite individual: the opposition between the resolution that exceeds what verification can deliver and the honest minimum that stops at what it can actually defend.

That Zaman Ali acknowledges Augustine in his prefatory material — thanking him for the map while refusing the exit — is the most economical possible statement of where his system stands in relation to the longest tradition of serious engagement with the same problem his system addresses. It is, philosophically, the right acknowledgment to make.

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Note on Method

This comparison proceeds from textual analysis of the primary sources only. No claim is made about the biographical intentions of either author. The philosophical positions attributed to each thinker are derived from the texts as analyzed, not from secondary literature or external biographical sources. The comparison is structural and argumentative, not historical or biographical.